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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effectiveness of an immersion-in-literacy program in a first-grade classroom. Six of the 22 students (all six were boys) indicated on a reading attitude survey that they did not like to read books. The classroom teacher set up her classroom so that it fostered literacy development. Some of the experiences and activities she used included reading aloud to the students, shared reading, a home reading project, and cross-age reading. Students completed two more reading attitude surveys. By the end of the school year, all students felt that they were readers and that they enjoyed reading. Findings suggest that the classroom environment and the experiences the children had with literacy played an important role in this change in attitude. (Contains 12 references. The three reading surveys are attached.) (RS)

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Immersion in Literacy

By
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June 8, 1994

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Immersion in Literacy

My project began when I discovered that one-quarter of my first grade class didn't like to read books. I decided to explore some ways of generating interest in reading and books. Through my research I learned about different ways of immersing children in literacy experiences. The first idea I explored was how to create a print-rich environment in my classroom. In this paper I tell how I set up my classroom so that it fostered literacy development. Some of the experiences I provided in the classroom were reading aloud to the students, shared reading, a home reading project, and cross-age reading. The results of this project were that by the end of the year all of my students felt that they were readers and that they enjoy reading. The environment I provided and the experiences the children had with literacy played an important role in this change of attitude.

My Questions

What things can be done in my classroom to change negative feelings kids have about reading books?

What can I do to help kids feel that they are readers?

Background Information

I actually began working on this project at the beginning of the 1993 school year. At that time I interviewed each of the children in my class using Reading Attitude Survey #1. I have attached a copy of this to the end of this project. I wanted to find out if the children enjoyed books and some of the support they have gotten from home in regards to reading.

I was appalled to discover that 6 out of the 22 kids did not like to read books. Their reasons were either that it was too boring or that they didn't know how. I could see that I needed to do something to help them change their attitudes about books and to help them see that they are readers.

Through this project I am going to focus mainly on these 6 kids and note changes in their attitudes towards reading. It was interesting that all six of these are boys. One of these boys is Caucasian, four are Filipino, and one is Laotian. Through questions on the survey I found that five of them had someone at home that reads to them and that the same five could name a favorite book. I also found out that five of them have books of their own at home and that all of them had checked out books from the public library. I still had the feeling that they probably weren't exposed to books on a regular basis and began my research with this premise in mind.

Research

In beginning my research I read Frank Smith's book Insult to Intelligence. I think that Smith's idea of inviting kids to join the "Literacy Club" is the crux of the issue involving reading attitudes and how children perceive themselves as readers. Teachers need to find ways to get the kids to join the club and then interest them in the club's activities.

According to Smith, children should not have to meet special requirements to join the club, but instead should be accepted as members and shown how to participate in reading and writing by experienced club members. New members should not be forced to participate in activities and can often become interested in the activities they see experienced members participating in. These activities need to be meaningful to the child.

My other research has involved some ideas on how to implement a club atmosphere in my classroom, so that kids can become active members in the "Literacy Club" with assistance from experienced members. Most of the ideas I researched are based on the premise of immersion in literacy through creating a literacy environment, reading aloud to children, shared reading, home reading projects, and cross-age partnerships.

Why Immersion?

"Children who are immersed in a print-rich environment develop awareness of the existence, nature, and purpose of print as they see it used functionally every day" (O'Donnell and Wood, 1992, p. 21). Even before children start school they are immersed in reading and writing. Many times parents aren't even aware of the literacy background their children are exposed to: on television, watching parents reading and writing, in stores, along the road, while eating breakfast cereal, etc.

This same type of immersion can be brought into the classroom so that children can continue to be exposed to a print-rich environment. "Holdaway (1979) contended that children are as predisposed to learn to read naturally as they are to learn to speak because they are immersed in both oral and written language" (Vacca, Vacca, and Gove, 1991, p. 67). The classroom environment is an important component of this immersion as well as giving children many opportunities to read throughout the day.

Creating a Literacy Environment

A print-rich classroom contains many opportunities for purposeful reading and writing. They may be books, charts, signs, rules, schedules, notes, etc. They can be seen throughout the classroom and included in many of the different play areas. The role of everyday print is very important in a child's learning to read and these types of reading materials need to be included in the classroom.

Another important area in the classroom and one which should have its own defined space is the classroom library. The library should be "a focal area within the classroom where books are easily accessible to students." (Fractor, Woodruff, Martinez, and Teal,1993, p. 477) These authors also include the following criteria for setting up a classroom library: It should be an attractive area which is partitioned from the rest of the classroom with comfortable seating for five to six kids. There should be five to six books per child in the classroom and include a variety of genres and reading levels. Books should be arranged in two different ways. The first is open shelves so that the front of the book is displayed and the other is on shelves with the spine showing to save space. It is also a good idea to have literature oriented props and displays available. Books should be organized into categories. One teacher described by Huck and Kerstetter in Children's Literature in the Reading Program suggests that not all the books be put out at once and that she rotates books about once a month. She also asks her students for suggestions on types of books and lets them categorize them (Cullinan, 1987, p. 31).

Read Aloud

In his Read Aloud Handbook Jim Trelease writes about reading aloud: "Wherever it is done, the overwhelming result is that it improves children's attitudes toward books and reading" (Trelease, 1982, p.12). Most early childhood teachers recommend and hope that parents are taking time to read to their children at home. The important part of reading aloud is that it needs to be done with enthusiasm and communicate a love of books for this is where many reading attitudes are formed. If parents are too busy and the reading becomes a chore this negative attitude will be passed on to the child.

Of course this attitude of enthusiasm is one that also needs to be carried through at school by the teacher. "Enthusiasm for reading spreads like wildfire when teachers are excited about it" (Cullinan, 1987, p. 9). Picking good literature to share is one way to generate enthusiasm. These books should have a well-developed story structure and interesting characters or they should include a repetitive story pattern and be highly predictable.

Hearing stories read out loud gives children a chance to experience book-language which is often very different from our spoken language. As children gain knowledge in book language they have a better understanding of the meaning and

that in turn makes it easier for them to read. Jim Trelease has noted that the grades that show the greatest decline in grade-level reading performance are the ones that show the greatest decline in read-aloud practices (Trelease, 1982, p. 25).

Bill Martin Jr. sums up his feelings about reading aloud when he writes about his 5th grade teacher. "A blessed thing happened to me as a child. I had a teacher who read to me. Of course she was reading to all the other children in the classroom, but I believed she was reading just to me because I was a non-reader" (Cullinan,1987, p. 15). He goes on to say that we can use children's interests and book experiences to lure them into reading.

Shared Reading

Shared reading is a natural extension of reading aloud. It is the bedtime experience done in the classroom with either a small or large group of kids. Don Holdaway has been given credit in many of the sources I've read for adapting the bedtime story into a workable experience in the classroom. The teacher uses a big book of a predictable story to share with the class. Because the book has larger pictures and print the children can group around the teacher and respond more easily to the text as they read together. This interaction and proximity to the teacher allows for much more replication of the bedtime experience than reading aloud or having the students read using multiple copies of the same text. There is a close feeling that Bobbi Fisher calls "developing a sense of scommunity in the classroom" (Fisher, 1991, p.48).

After a few readings the children are encouraged to join in the reading as they are able. Even children who are at a very emergent stage feel successful when they do shared reading, because they can participate at their own developmental level. The interaction with the text, the teacher, and the other children help keep a child engaged in the reading. Shared reading gives added practice in reading because the text can be read over and over again in many different ways.

Teachers often let the children choose books to reread during shared reading and then introduce a new book every three or four days. Being able to choose adds to the enjoyment of the shared reading for the children. So does the possibility of singing songs and dramatizing stories. All of this practice helps to strengthen the child's confidence as a reader. Shared reading time should be relaxed with an emphasis on

enjoyment and appreciation. For struggling readers it offers a non-threatening approach to reading that strengthens skills and enjoyment (Routman, 1991, p 33).

After reading a book several times through shared reading children are often able to read the book independently during choice time. At this time they could read by themselves, with some friends, to the teacher or other adults, or with a tape player. Again, this is giving them more practice in a risk-free setting enabling them to feel like readers.

Home Reading Projects

Home reading projects are a natural extension of shared and independent reading done in the classroom. Linda Lamme writes about a girl named Tameshia who was so absorbed in a book her teacher let her take home that the bus driver had to remind her to get off at her stop (Cullinan, 1987, p. 41). Most children are very excited to show their parents and family members that they can read.

There are many different types of home reading projects. In Joyful Learning Bobbi Fisher describes how she encourages kids in her class to take home books from the school library and the classroom library. She has a check-out system the kids are taught how to use independently (Fisher, 1991, p. 84).

Regie Routman describes a school-wide independent reading project called WEB (Wonderfully Exciting Books) in her book Invitations. It also includes an interview component in which the kids are interviewed about their book after they've completed it (Routman,1991).

School-home reading programs are yet another way for kids to practice reading and to develop more confidence in themselves as readers. It is also a good way to involve parents in the reading process and perhaps interest them in doing more reading with their child.

Cross-Age Reading

Another means of immersing young children in literature is to set up a reading buddy system with a class of older children. The kids are paired up with the older child reading to the younger one. Cohen, Kulik and Kulik (1982) have written "that attitudes toward school and learning increase positively for all students involved in cross-age tutoring (cited by Labbo and Teale, 1990, p.362). It has also been shown by Feiteson,

Kita, and Goldstein (1986) that "being read to helps a child build an excellent foundation for continued literacy growth" (cited by Labbo and Teale, 1990, p. 362). This corresponds with the research I have read on the benefits of reading aloud. Cross-age reading programs are yet another way to expose young children to literature. The children involved often develop a very nurturing relationship with each other which also helps to promote joy in reading.

Though there are many different models for cross-age tutoring, most of them follow a similar format. The older child selects a book to read and then practices it in his/her classroom or at home. Then he reads the book to the younger child, asking questions to help the child become engaged in the book. After reading and talking about the book they do some type of response to it. This could involve making a similar book of their own or drawing and writing about a favorite part or the characters. Through this process the older child is also able to read more fluently and have better comprehension.

Aliteracy

Through all of the research I have done there has been concern that poor attitudes towards reading lead to children and adults who can read but choose not to read. Aliteracy is the term that has been used to describe this (Cullinan, 1987, p. 11). Jim Trelease thinks that though we spend a lot of time in school teaching kids how to read; we also need to teach kids to want to read. "There is the key: desire. It is the prime mover, the magic ingredient" (Trelease,1982, p. 24).

My Project

I began my project by using the idea of immersion in literacy experiences to foster a better attitude toward reading and books. The whole class took part in these literacy experiences, but the kids I will refer back to most often are the six boys I mentioned earlier. Also, I actually began this project last Fall.

Creating a Literacy Environment

When I set up my classroom last Fall I did it with the idea of developing literacy. I planned for having lots of functional print in different areas of the classroom: Classroom helper chart, birthday graph, calendar, daily schedule, class rules, etc.

There were also books in our reading area, in the class library, and other areas around the room. Many writing materials were also available for student use: Pre-made books, paper to make their own books, drawing paper, writing paper, pencils, crayons, markers, etc. At this time I did not incorporate much in the way of reading or writing materials in the various play areas though the materials were readily available for that use. It didn't take too long for the kids to start moving some of the paper and writing implements to play areas, especially when they created an office.

Our classroom library was set up much as was described in the research. It was partitioned off by shelves which made it a private area. It included a bean bag chair, a big cushion, and carpet squares. There were probably about five books per child which were categorized and displayed in various ways. The ones I recently read to the class were displayed on a set of open shelves so that the kids could easily see the covers. Some books were displayed with their spines showing; some paperbacks and magazines were stacked. There were separate boxes or crates for easy-to-reads, non-fiction books, Zoo Books, etc. The kids could easily find what they were looking for and I tried to have them put the books back where they got them even though that wasn't always successful.

Read Aloud

Beginning the first day of school I read aloud to the class everyday. We would meet in an area at the back of the room. Throughout the year I read a variety of genre including fiction, pattern books, non-fiction, and poetry. I usually spent time talking about the cover -- the title, author, and predictions about what the book might be about. By the end of the year I could hardly hold up the book before the class was reading the title and author themselves. After reading I would usually let those who wanted to respond to parts of the book. Many would have me turn back to specific pages, others would tell about their favorite parts. Sometimes, if it was appropriate, we talked about the story structure or the characters.

I found that many kids really became engrossed in the stories and seemed to enjoy them. Others were obviously not as interested -- moving around, talking,bothering others, etc. If given a choice, many of the kids would prefer to sit at their seats and write in their journals as I was reading. Of course, I would often catch them listening and trying to see the pictures. Out of the six target kids four of them had a real difficult time listening to stories. One of them really disliked it almost until the

end of the year when he finally began choosing to come and listen instead of staying at his seat.

Shared Reading

Also, at the beginning of the year we began doing shared reading on a daily basis. At this time we sang songs and then either read from charts, sentence strips, or big books. It was a very active time and more kids were really engaged in the reading when they could also participate. Once familiar with a story or poem they really enjoyed reading different parts in groups or dramatizing it.

Usually after reading it in a big book for a few days I would pass out individual books to read alone or with a partner. I found that partner reading was very successful because the kids could act as a support for each other. These books were also available during choice time for the kids to continue reading on their own. Overall, I felt that the kids, including the six target kids, were much more engaged in shared reading than when I was reading a story to them. It was much easier to keep their attention.

Reading Attitude Survey #2

Shortly after the end of the semester I did another interview with each of the kids using a slightly different survey. Some of the questions were basically the same, but I also asked some other questions to get some different information too. I was pleased that at this time all but one of the six boys said that they liked reading books because they are fun or because they are learning to read. The one boy said that he sort of liked to read books because sometimes they're really hard and sometimes they're not. All of the boys could give me more information about books they like and four of them could tell me the name of a favorite author. One still said that no one read to him at home.

Though I felt that I really had some good results already with the things I had done, there were still a couple more ideas I read about that I wanted to try. So for the rest of the year I continued reading aloud and shared reading, but also tried a home reading project and some cross-age reading.

Home Reading Project

I have often thought about doing a home reading program using books in the classroom, but was worried about losing books and couldn't think of any easy check-out system. But I finally came up with a plan that was workable for me. I used a big sheet of heavy tag board and put library pockets on it. Each child had his own with his name on it. He then filled out a 3x5 card with the name of his book and the date he checked it out. He then put this card in his pocket on the chart. That way I knew which book each child had and how long he had it. When a child returned his book he took the old card out an put it in a manila envelope in his work folder, then checked out a new book. The kids each had a zip lock bag with their name and my name on it to transport the books back and forth. Many kids checked out a new book every day or two. After five days I would send a note home reminding the parents and child to read the book and bring it back. If it still hadn't come back in ten days I would call and talk to one of the parents. I really didn't have to make too many calls and only one book was lost.

Because I started this program after parent conferences I was able to talk to parents about it at that time and also give them a note about how they could help their child read at home. I think this helped to make parents aware of why the books were coming home and also how to help their child. Also, at this time of the year all of the kids could actually read some of the books. They could check out any of the books in our classroom, and especially liked taking home some that I had read, copies of shared reading books, and books we made in class. They also liked the Wright Group Storybox books and some simple phonetic readers. At first I was concerned about them taking home books that were too hard or too easy, but I decided that didn't really matter as long as they were reading or the parent was reading to them. Most of them did pick books they could actually read.

I was very pleased with the excitement this generated. They enjoyed looking for the next book they would take home and often practiced reading them before school or during choice time. Rickimarie's mother told me that Rickimarie would read her book to each person in the family. This project really generated a lot of interest in books and reading.

The six target kids all were pretty active in the project. They probably took new books home at least two times a week.

Cross-Aged Reading

My class has had 4th grade buddies all year that we have done different writing projects with. I talked to the 4th grade teacher about having the 4th graders pick out books to read to the 1st graders for the last 2 months of the school year. However, I think we only ended up doing it for two or three weeks because of schedule adjustments for swimming, beach trips, etc. Because of that it is hard to judge the success of it.

Some of the kids really enjoyed it; some did not at all. The ones who didn't mostly didn't like the books the 4th graders picked out; they were too long or boring. Also the 4th graders didn't necessarily practice the book ahead of time.

I would like to try this again next year, but with more collaboration between the 4th grade teacher and myself. I hope that she will be interested in following the model in the research article I read by Labbo and Teale. Our intermediate teachers have often complained about how poorly some of the kids can read, so I would really like to see what impact cross-age reading might have on that. I would like to work with the 4th graders on how to pick out a book and how to engage the first graders in it. I really think we could make it work to benefit both 1st graders and 4th graders.

Reading Attitude Survey #3

At the end of the year I interviewed the kids again using a different survey. This time I really wanted to see if they felt that they were readers. I also wanted to know to what degree their reading was influenced by me reading aloud, shared reading, the home reading project, and reading with the 4th graders. A copy is attached.

In tallying it out I was excited to see that everyone felt like a reader at least sometimes. I talked to most of the kids who marked "sometimes" and found out that they don't feel like a reader if they are reading hard books or if there are hard or big words. That seems pretty reasonable to me.

The responses seemed to be pretty equal as to which things helped them become readers. I was surprised that so many of them felt that my reading to them had such a big impact. Also, I noted that everyone felt that the home reading program helped, at least a little. It didn't surprise me that six kids said that reading with the 4th graders wasn't helpful.

Out of my six target boys four felt like readers and the other two did sometimes. Five of them though shared reading helped and the other two marked "a little". Four of them thought that taking books home helped and the other two thought it helped a little. Four of them thought that reading with their 4th grade partner helped and two didn't think it was helpful. Again, this pretty much shows that each of these things were helpful to some, but not to others. That leads me to believe that it is probably important to do them all because based on individual preferences some are more helpful than others.

Conclusion

I think that from my research and the results of what happened in my classroom this year that immersion in literacy experiences can improve the attitude children have about reading. I also think that children who have been in such a program feel that they are readers. Through a literacy immersion program children can become active members in the "Literacy Club". The teacher, other students, and their parents are the experienced members who can show them and guide their participation in becoming active club members, or readers.

As in other types of clubs I feel that it is important to have a variety of activities available for club members. Not everyone benefits in the same ways from the same activities. My last reading survey showed the diversity of interest in the various activities available to the children. This allows them to be individuals and meet their needs of membership in ways that are most meaningful to them.

Through my research and our literacy class I have found other ways in which I'd like to expand literacy immersion next year. In addition to doing the things I have done this year I want to add more literacy materials to dramatic play centers. I want to begin my home reading program at the beginning of the year. Also I want to expand the cross-age reading as I discussed earlier.

I think that I have made great gains this year in teaching kids to *want* to read as well as *how* to read. Actually, the how is much easier when they really want to be readers. The kids in my classroom are excited about books and reading and I think that is one of the greatest gifts I could give them this year.

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Reading Attitude Survey #1

1. Do you like to read books? Why?

2. What kind of books do you like to read?

3. Does somebody at home read books to you?

   Who?

4. What is your favorite book?

5. Who is your favorite author?

6. Who is your favorite illustrator?

7. Do you own some of your own books?

8. Do you check out books from the town library?

9. Do you like to read books to yourself?

10. Would you rather watch TV, play Nintendo, or read a book?

Name _____ Date:

Reading Attitude Survey #2

1. Do you like to read books? Why?

2. What kind of books do you like to read?

3. Who reads books to you at home?

4. What is your favorite book?

5. Who is your favorite author?

6. Who is your favorite illustrator?

7. What kind of reading do you like the best: whole class, small group, book tubs, during centers, other?
What do you like about it?

8. Which kind of reading don't you like?
Why?

9. What do you do best in reading?

10. What is hard for you in reading?

11. Would you rather watch TV, play Nintendo, or read a book?

Name _____ Date _____

Reading Attitude Survey #3

1. Do you feel that you are a reader?

Yes
15

Sometimes
8

No
0

2. If no, why don't you feel like a reader?

3. Which of these things have helped you become a reader? Or if answered no in #1, which of these have you enjoyed? Listening to stories Mrs. Nagan reads the class?

Yes
16

A Little
5

No
2

Reading stories together in class?

Yes
15

A Little
5

No
3

Taking books home to read to your parents?

Yes
14

A Little
8

No
0

Reading with your fourth grade partner?

Yes
12

A Little
3

No
6